

Art and Science. Works from the Collection of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga.

Paolo Pereira (texts) Massimo Listri (photographs)

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At first sight, this book looks like a catalog: that of the masterpieces on display in a premier Portuguese museum. At second sight, it looks like one of the well-known books by Martin Kemp and others on a similar topic. And, true, it is perfectly possible to read it as a catalog and see it as continuation of the line of thinking launched by Kemp and his followers. Such a reading, however, would be unfair to the very original take on the catalog format as well as the art and science subject one finds in this publication.

A collaboration between a major art institution (the National Museum of Ancient Art) and a major institution dedicated to scientific research (the Champalimaud Foundation, equally in Lisbon), this book –the first one of a larger series– explores new ways of bringing together art and science. Generally speaking, this encounter takes two forms. The first one is diachronic: in this case, one investigates the way in which the mutual relationships between art and science evolve through time –and this evolution is not that of a growing divergence, but rather a zigzag line sometimes stronger and sometimes weaker affinities. The second one is synchronic: in this case, one examines the way in which scientific inventions or revolutions have shaped art, or vice versa (although one should never forget that the influence of science on art is easier to observe and probably also more important than that of art on science). *Art and Science. Works from the Collection of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga* follows a different path, which aims at showing both the autonomy of both fields (the book opens with a strong statement: “The main concern of Art is not Science. And the main concern is not Art”, p. 13) and their inevitable proximity. This proximity is approached here from the point of view of the arts, more specifically of the visual arts (painting and

sculpture), and it is studied in a way that is neither illustrative nor metaphorical. The book does not try to make a case for “art as research”, which would be the metaphorical way of touching upon the subject. Corollarily, it refrains from suggesting that artistic achievements can be used to highlight the cultural use-value of technological and scientific devices or concepts, and this would be the illustrative way. Instead, the book departs from the idea that works of art are organized according to certain patterns, models, structures, ways of thinking, social and political debates that can only be understood when related to a certain state of knowledge –a state that, by definition, is always on the move, no less in older periods than in more recent ones.

It is this type of social knowledge, inextricably linked with a wide range of belief systems and traditions, that the authors of this book attempt to disclose. They do so in various ways, which cannot be separated from the material form of their enterprise. *Art and Science. Works from the Collection of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga* is more than a lavishly illustrated scholarly study or a extensively captioned iconography. The images of the book offer close ups of the works under comment, while the texts offer close readings of what the images help visualize. Pereira and Listri have succeeded in building a truly hybrid composition where the verbal and the visual part seem at the same time to create each other and to be created by each other. While reproducing also complete paintings, the photographs by Listri highlight in the very first place intriguing details, which are the basis for Pereira’s historical comments. This emphasis on the detail can be inferred also from the fact that in almost all cases Listri decontextualizes the images as much as possible: the frame of the paintings (if any of course), is not shown; the pictures refrain from showing the works of art in their architectural context; and they have the supreme modesty to put themselves at the service of their subject (the photographer tries to record, to document, to show as clearly as possible, he does not interfere with these works by turning his pictures in autonomous works of art themselves). The detail is however never just a detail: the text by Pereira, which manages in combining scholarly precision with stylistic elegance, gradually inserts each detail, each object, each figure into its larger cultural and historical context, while insisting on the expanded notion of knowledge. The latter does not simply mean a body of empirically proved and socially accepted scientific facts, but the broader network of facts, traditions, beliefs, and uncategorizable events.

Reading this book is an amazing journey. First of all through time, for the works of art discussed in this book cover various historical periods from the 14th to the 18th Century. Second through the very diverse types of items that one finds in a museum, the contemporary notion of “art” being insufficient to cover the whole spectrum of objects that a society considers worth of praise, care, love, but also fear. Third, through the countless layers of knowledge and science that are crystallized in each of these objects, and whose reading moreover does not cease changing over time.

Jan Baetens